



KEEPING CLEAN & KEEPING SAFE

Keeping clean and keeping safe

The use of chemicals to combat superbugs such as clostridium difficile (c-diff) without adequate safety precautions is damaging the health of cleaners. UNISON has seen increasing evidence of cleaners who use chlorine containing products like as Actichlor, Actichlor Plus and Chlor Clean, suffering ill health side effects.

The union is successfully winning cases on behalf of members who are made ill because they are using these chemicals and is becoming increasingly concerned about this issue.

In order to find out how widespread this problem currently is, UNISON carried out a survey of safety reps – getting responses from 300 people who use these chemicals in their workplace.

This report highlights the results of that survey and looks at ways employers, working with UNISON safety reps, can minimize the risk of harm to staff while continuing to ensure that fighting superbugs is done effectively and safely for the good of service users, patients, their families and staff.

We surveyed members working in a range of public services including health, local government, education and police and justice, as well as members working in the private sector.

This survey included questions on the type of products used, the side effects they caused, and whether time off work or medical interventions were required as a result. It also included questions on what control measures employers had put in place and the campaigning activities of branches.



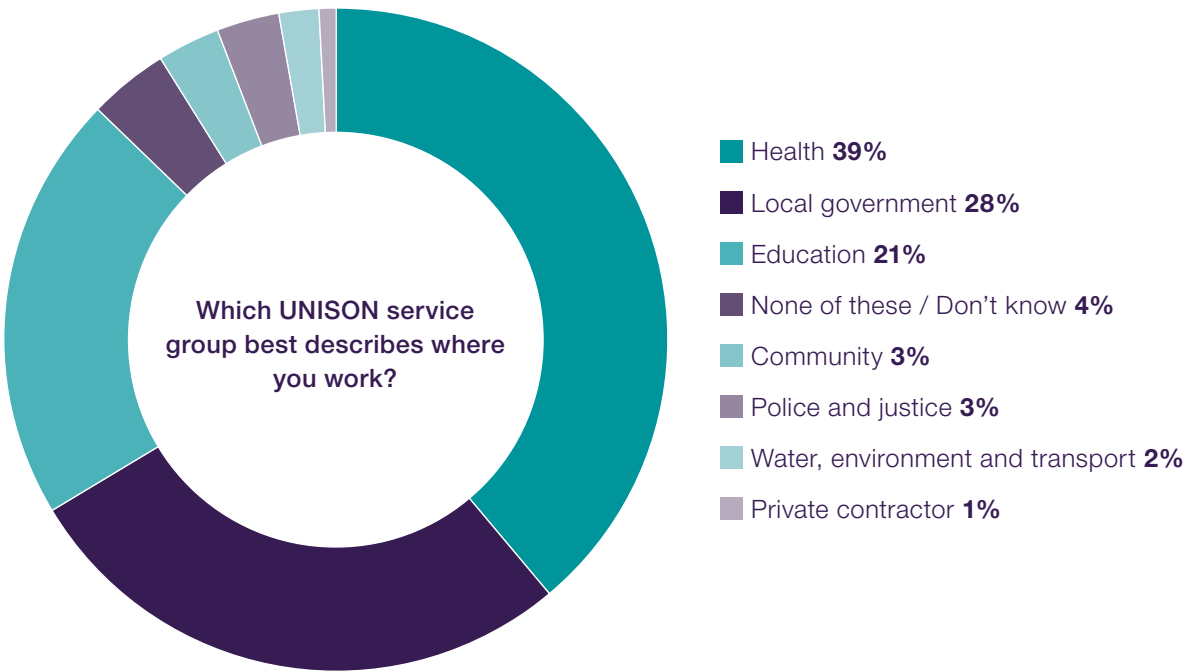
Executive summary

- Nearly a third overall, and over two thirds of those in the healthcare sector, said C-Diff was a concern where they worked
- Over a third overall, and nearly two thirds of those in the healthcare sector, and those who say C-Diff is an issue, use chlorine products
- 22% overall, and 37% of those that use chlorine, said cleaning products cause side effects. The most common side effects were skin complaints and asthma symptoms
- 10% overall, and 16% of those who use chlorine, say they or their members have sought medical assistance because of cleaning products used
- 5% overall, and 12% of those that use chlorine, report they or their members take time off work as a result of the side effects of products used. In over half of cases this involved one week or more
- Only 32% of employees surveyed said that employers conducted risk assessments on the use of cleaning products that were suitable and sufficient
- Only 43% of employers considered alternative products, and only 14% improved ventilation.



Survey results

Figure 1



300 participated in the survey. Of these, almost 40% were from the health sector, 27% in local government and 21% in schools and further and higher education (Figure 1).

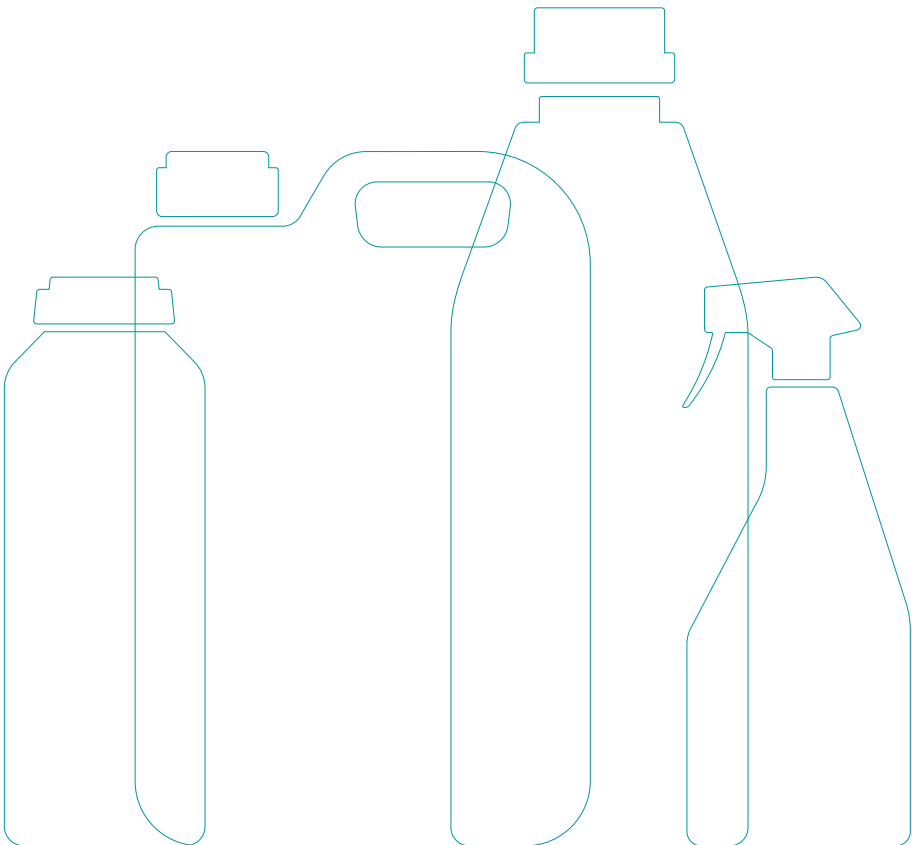


Figure 2
Is combating Clostridium difficile (commonly known as C.diff.) a major concern where you work?

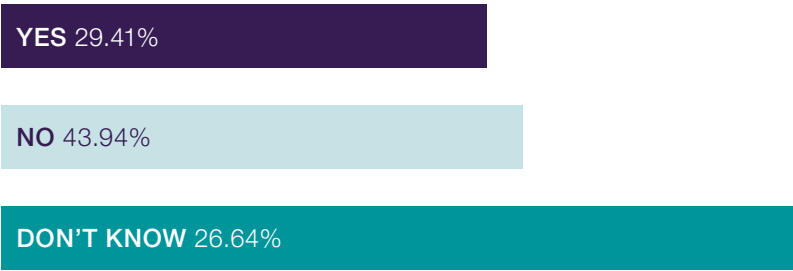
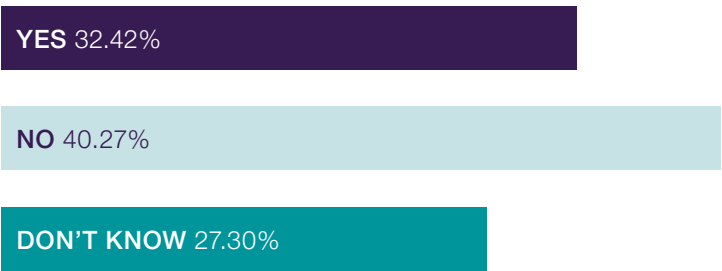


Figure 3
Do you or your colleagues use products using chlorine, such as Actichlor, Actichlor Plus, Sanichlor, Biospor, Endbac, Chlor Clean and Premisan?



Nearly a third said that C-Diff was a concern where they worked (Figure 2) and almost exactly a third of all those surveyed said they used chlorine based products (Figure 3).

However when results were restricted to the healthcare/hospital sector, these figures rose significantly to 69% and 60% respectively. 64% of those who said C-Diff was an issue use chlorine. This increases to 67% of healthcare sector respondents where C-Diff is a problem. This shows that most, but not all, healthcare employers use chlorine to combat C-Diff.

95% of those who said C-Diff was an issue worked in the healthcare sector and the healthcare sector accounted for 80% of those that use chlorine based products.

The most commonly used products were Chlor Clean, Actichlor and Actichlor Plus, all products that are associated with with deep clean activities and combating C-Diff.

However 17% of those where C-Diff was an issue at work, said their employers did not use chlorine based products, indicating that there are alternative ways of combating C-Diff.

Figure 4
Has any cleaning product caused any adverse side effect?



22% said that cleaning products caused side effects (Figure 4). However when this sample was restricted to those that used chlorine based products the figure rose to 37%.

Overall employers who used chlorine accounts accounted for 57% of those who reported side effects, whereas those that didn't use chlorine accounted for 20% (the difference being accounted for by those didn't know whether chlorine was used or not). This indicated that although chlorine caused most side effects, there were still side effects associated with non-chlorine products.

Figure 5
What side effects have you or your colleagues suffered?

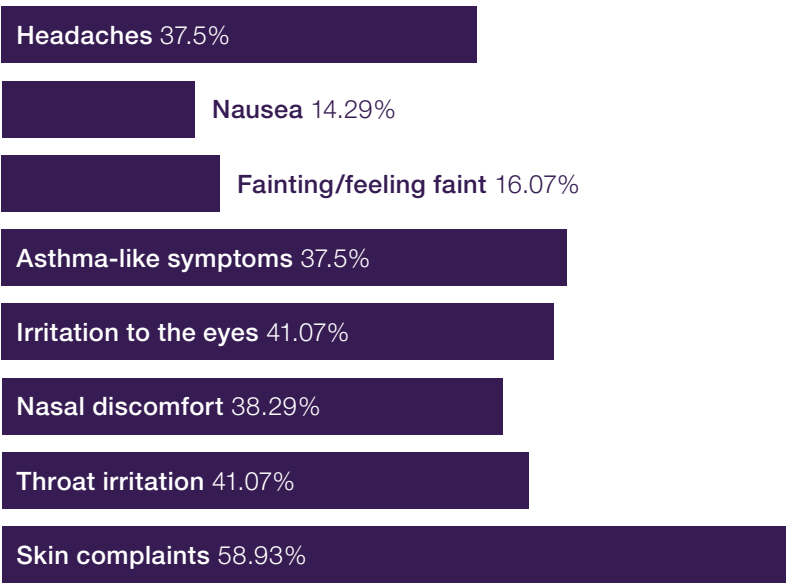
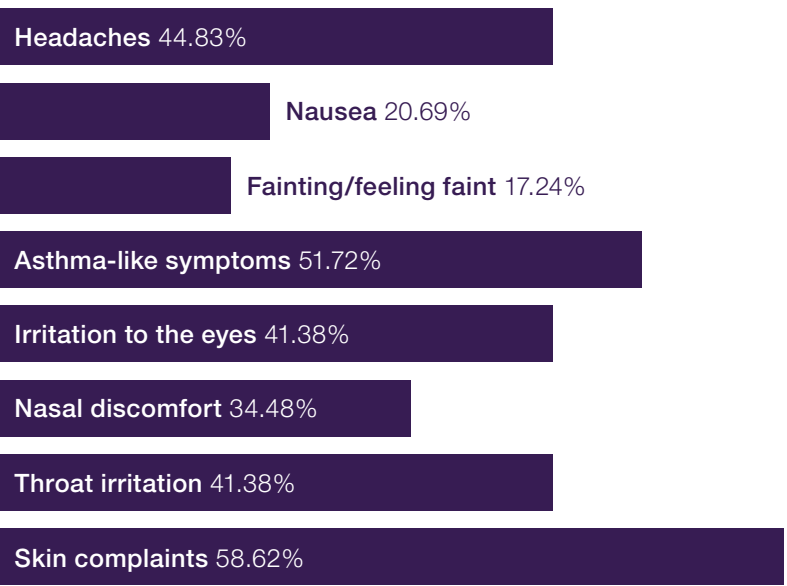


Figure 6 (sample of those who used chlorine-based products)
What side effects have you or your colleagues suffered?



The most common side effects were skin complaints and asthma symptoms (Figure 5).

However, when the sample was restricted to those who used chlorine products, there was a significant rise in the proportion of those that reported asthma-like symptoms, and a slight fall in those that reported skin complaints – although these were still the most common side effects. (Figure 6).

Figure 7

After using cleaning products, have you, or your colleague, required any type of medical intervention (e.g. appointment with occupational nurse/doctor, GP, hospital or visit to chemist/pharmacist)?



Figure 8 (sample of those who used chlorine-based products)

After using chlorine-based products, have you, or your colleague, required any type of medical intervention (e.g. appointment with occupational nurse/doctor, GP, hospital or visit to chemist/pharmacist)?



10% of all those surveyed said that they or their colleagues have at some point required medical intervention because of the use of cleaning products (Figure 7).

This figure is considerably higher (16%) when the sample was restricted to those who used chlorine based products (Figure 8), and much lower (4%) when restricted to those that didn't use such products.

Figure 9
Did the side effects from using cleaning products lead to you or your colleagues requiring time off work?



Figure 10 (sample of those who used chlorine-based products)
Did the side effects from using chlorine-based products lead to you or your colleagues requiring time off work?



5% of all those surveyed (Figure 9), and 12% of those that used chlorine products (Figure 10), said that staff at some point had required time off as a result of the use of cleaning products. Of those who required time off work 55% required one week or more off work, 41% over two weeks, and 18% four weeks or more.

Only one of those surveyed, out of 118, where chlorine products were not used, reported cleaning products causing staff to take time off work. This data indicates that cleaning products have the potential to cause significant damage to people’s health, and that the most serious side effects are largely caused by chlorine products.

Risk assessment

Figure 11
Has your employer carried out any risk assessments regarding the use of these products?



Figure 12
Do you think that the risk assessment and the controls that were put in place were suitable and sufficient?



54% of all surveyed said that employers had carried out risk assessments (figure 11), with 32% saying they were suitable and sufficient (Figure 12). When the sample was restricted to those who reported side effects both figures actually fell to 52% and 21% respectively.

The perception that these risk assessments were not suitable and sufficient was reinforced by an analysis of controls that were used. Of those that carried out risk assessments, whereas 75% said their employers used PPE, only 43% reported the use of alternative products, and 14% improved ventilation (Figure 13).

Figure 13
 What safety precautions/controls have been introduced to combat the hazards posed by cleaning products?

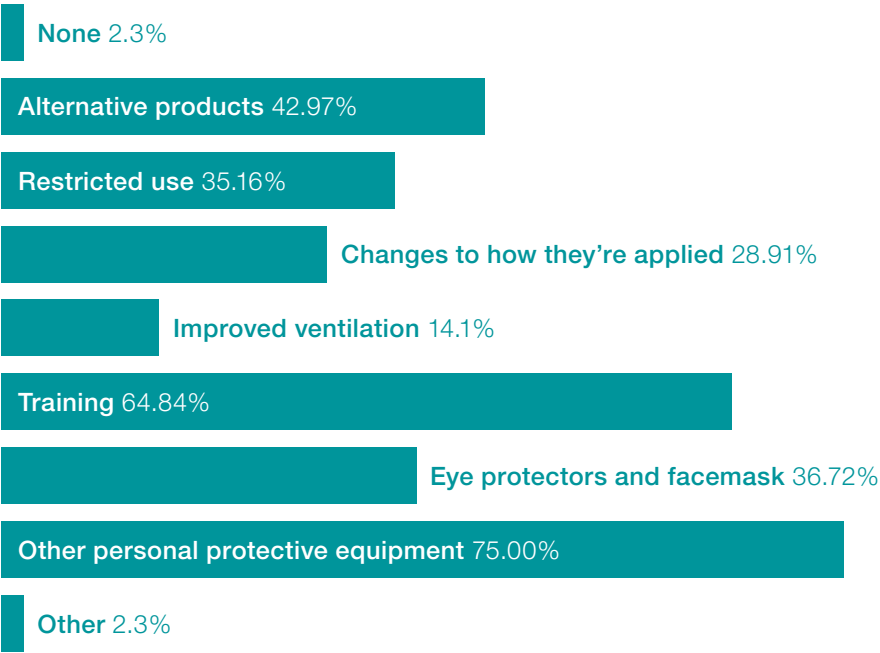
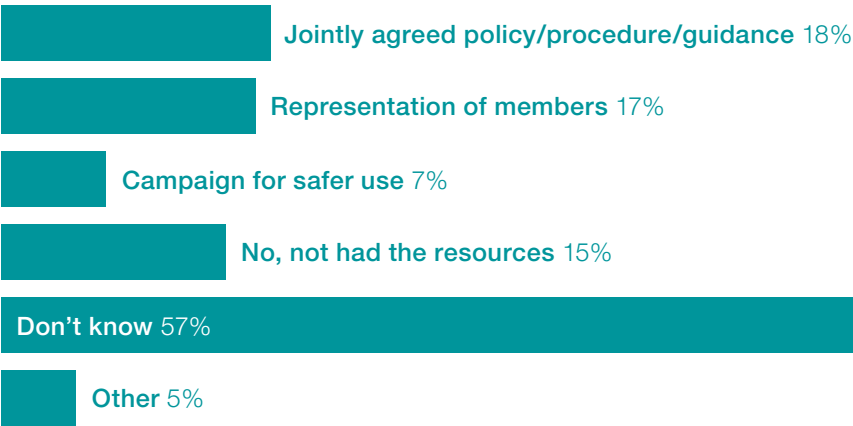


Figure 14
 Has your branch been involved with any of these actions with regard to safer working with cleaning products?



18% said their branches had been involved in negotiating jointly agreed policies and 7% in campaigns for safer working.

Conclusion

This research has produced evidence that some cleaning products are having significant adverse effects on workers' health. Many respondents reported the use of such products resulting in staff taking time off work and seeking medical attention.

It also showed the worse effects being largely, although not exclusively, caused by chlorine products.

UNISON has long recognised the importance of measures to combat C-Diff and this survey has shown that that it remains a significant hazard in a large number of workplaces, particularly those in the healthcare sector. UNISON's survey shows that a majority of workplaces are relying on chlorine based products to combat C-Diff.

Many staff are reporting side effects from using these cleaning products – often, sufficiently serious to cause staff to seek medical intervention and in the most serious cases, significant amounts of time off work. These most serious cases would appear to be largely, but not entirely, caused by chlorine products.

The survey demonstrated serious deficiencies in how employers conducted risk assessments. 14% said their employers had not conducted any risk assessments around cleaning products and only a minority (32%) said the risk assessments undertaken were suitable and sufficient.

In terms of preventive measures, UNISON's survey showed employers relying heavily on personal protective equipment (PPE). Under health and safety law employers are required to consider whether it is first practical to get rid of the hazard altogether, and if that is not possible to see if there are less hazardous options, such as less toxic chemicals, available.

They must also consider ways to prevent access or reduce exposure. Yet UNISON's survey shows that only a minority are using measures such as alternative products or restricting the use of certain products, and only 14% are trying to improve ventilation.

C-Diff must be a top priority for employers where superbugs pose a significant risk to health such as those operating in healthcare settings. However, in doing so they must take reasonable steps to minimize the danger to the health of their workers. This survey shows employers failing to do that.

UNISON will be speaking to employers about how they can maximise the safest ways of eliminating C-Diff. This means considering less hazardous products to chlorine, and where this is not possible, measures such as improved ventilation, to reduce the risk these products pose to the health of workers and the public.

We will also be encouraging them to work with our health and safety representatives to introduce proper risk assessments and ensuring that proper safety equipment is available to all staff who work with these chemicals.

We will also be speaking to the regulators, including the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), HSE Northern Ireland and the Care Quality Commission to ensure that they provide clear and unambiguous guidance. We are also calling for the reintroduction of proactive inspections to check that employers are getting it right and keeping their staff safe.

That is in the best interest of staff, the public and the employers.

